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ON

CONVERSION.

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A
S E R M O N
O N T H E
Nature and Necessity
O F
C O N V E R S I O N.

By MATHER BYLES, D. D. ↖

Pastor of a Church in Boston.

—Go—TURN *the Disobedient to the Wisdom of*
the Just. Luk. 1. 17.

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S. E. R. M. O. N.



D. D.



T H E
Nature and Necessity
 O F
 C O N V E R S I O N.



MATTH. xviii. 3.

Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little Children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

THE main Subject which our Lord JESUS CHRIST insisted on in the constant Course of his Ministry, was, the Necessity of Conversion and the New Birth. When *Nicodemus* came to converse with him, he took the First Opportunity to surprize the Honourable *Rabbi* with this most important Doctrine: *Except a Man be born again he cannot see the Kingdom of GOD*, Joh. iii. 3. And here in my Text, when the ambitious Disciples came to him to determine a Dispute which they had been no doubt warmly engaged in; *Which of them should be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?* Nay, says our Lord, Not too fast! *Except ye be converted, and become as little Children, ye shall not so much as enter in there at all.* Pride, and Strife, and Emulations, are no Preparatives for that World. Nor the Kingdom of Grace below, nor the Kingdom

Kingdom of Glory above, is to be enter'd with this unmortified, aspiring Temper. Conversion. Humility, and a new Life, must make us meet for that Inheritance in Light. CHRIST himself has determined this Matter, and it therefore comes to us with all Authority and Conviction. Let us then attend earnestly to the Illustration and Application of the Words.

Except ye be converted, says the Text. Conversion, and to be converted, are Phrases often found in the Holy Scriptures; and our Salvation turns upon our right understanding what they mean. The Literal Sense of the Word *Conversion* then is no more than this, *turning about*. And this is the Meaning of the Word in this Place: and so it is explained in many other Texts. Sinners are called upon to *turn*: and this Short Word comprizes in it all Salvation. Let us meditate a little here, and endeavour to understand it well.

Man was at first created holy and happy in the Enjoyment of GOD. The Soul of *Adam* was filled with Thoughts of GOD, and Love to him. The Glory of GOD was his End in all that he did. A Sense of GOD, Love to GOD, and Satisfaction in the Will of GOD, made up the Happiness of *Adam* in Paradise. The Soul was satisfied and crowded with the Enjoyment of the Infinite Being; and a Sense of his Glories, and his Love.

But no sooner did *Adam* sin, and renounce this Happiness, than GOD forsook him, and he was left destitute and empty. That Soul which was once filled full of GOD, has now in it a vast Chasm. We feel indeed our want of Happiness: But our dark Minds know not where to find it. The Desire remains: but the Satisfaction is lost and gone. Our Souls feel something wanting. There's a vast Hollow there without any thing to fill it up. It is constantly craving, *Give, Give*. That's the Reason that Men are never perfectly easy and at Rest. They are forever pursuing that Happiness which they constantly miss of. GOD is gone, and Happiness with Him: and they try to fill up the empty Space with every thing they can lay their Hands on. Riches, and Honours, and Sensual Pleasures, these they fancy will make them happy. They try; and try again; and repeat their Trial: But they
still

still meet a Disappointment. They think; If ever I obtain such a thing, I shall be satisfied: If ever I get into such Circumstances, I shall set down contented. They obtain what they desire, and are just where they were before. Then they put off the Point of Happiness a little further, and still think on some Temporal Good which they have not yet enjoyed. If they obtain this too, they are still disappointed. Thus they go on from one Deceit to another, till Death overtakes them, before they have tried their last Project. This has been the Case of all Mankind, a very few excepted, from *Adam* until now: Nor will Men take Warning after all. All past Examples, and all their own Experience to this Moment, will make no lasting Impression on them. They have lost their Happiness in GOD: they wander from Creature to Creature in Pursuit of it. Madness is in their Hearts while they live; and after that they go down unto the Dead. I am not at all wandering from my Text, in these Observations, but making clear the Way to it.

Conversion then lies here. The Man, as he is pursuing Happiness in Creatures, is stop'd short, and convinced that these will not do. GOD gives him a New Sight of Things. He *sees an End of all Perfection* below GOD. He sees he is undone every where else. Now his Will is renewed. He *turns about*: (*THAT'S CONVERSION*) he TURNS ABOUT to God, and from this Time seeks all Happiness in Him alone. He says, *Who shall shew me any Good?* and he replies, *Lord, lift thou up the Light of thy Countenance upon me. Whom have I in Heaven but Thee? and there is none upon Earth that I desire besides Thee.* For ever after this Turn of Soul, the Man is set upon pleasing GOD: upon yielding to the Will of GOD: upon approving himself in the Sight of GOD. He never seeks his Happiness in the Creature any more. He may indeed, under the Power of Temptation, cast a wishing Look at them: But he recalls it in a Moment. He never can rest easy one Moment short of the Favour of GOD. Like the Needle touch'd by the Magnet, still pointing Northward. When it is shaken indeed, and tost about, it trembles, it wavers, it vibrates, it varies a Point this way and that, but it never fixes
but

but right North again. So a Soul thus touch'd by the SPIRIT of GOD, may be tost by Temptations, and the Hurries of the World; and look this Way and that among the Creatures, till the Violence of the Shock is over, but it never fixes; never rests, till it points full and steady to GOD again. This short Paragraph is, I think, a full and clear Account of Conversion.

We all are seeking Happiness. Every Natural Man seeks for it somewhere below GOD. Conversion is, The Man seeing he is infinitely wrong, *turns about* to GOD again, to seek his whole Satisfaction there. I hope I have now said enough in a few Words to explain the Matter, and shew what Conversion is. Before we proceed, we may make one or two solemn and affecting Reflections.

From what we have heard, we perceive that *Conversion is out of our own Power*. It is impossible for us to convert ourselves; or for all the Angels in Heaven to do it for us. To convince you of this, Let the Natural Man make the Experiment. Try this Moment. Try and see whether you can bring your Hearts to this, to renounce all Happiness in every thing but the Favour of GOD; to let GOD order for you; to have no Will of your own; to be swallowed up, and ravish'd with his Will, whatever it is. Can you renounce every mortal Idol? Can you leave this World, and all the low Delights of it, and go to a World where you will have none of them, but the Love of GOD will swallow you up? These things are so distant from an unrenewed Heart, that they look like wild Paradoxes to it. The Man finds he can't bring his Heart to this; and he thinks no Body ever could. And yet, there is not a good Man upon Earth, but knows a little what this means. He knows a little what it is to love GOD; to have his Happiness in GOD; to exult that the Will of GOD is done. Not a good Man upon Earth, but would gladly leave all the Delights of Life, only to be made perfectly holy. Nay, all he fears in Death is, lest it should not convey him to the World of perfect Holiness. Could he be sure that consummate Holiness would be to him the immediate Consequent of Death, he'd die chearfully, without a Struggle or Groan. Seeing then that Conversion is not in our own Power, let us
repair

repair to GOD for it. Sensible, and amazed at our own Incapacity, let us take to our selves Words and pray with repenting Ephraim, Jer. xxxi. 18. *Turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the Lord my GOD.* Be sensible of the sinful Nature which still carries us away from him. Be sensible of that first Sin, by which we departed from him, and pray, Psal. lxxx. 19. *Turn us again, O Lord GOD of Hosts, and cause thy Face to shine and we shall be saved.* To see our own Impotency is the first Step towards Conversion.

We here see our *Necessity of JESUS CHRIST.* We can't turn again to GOD without Him. No Man can come to the Father but by Him. The Enmity between GOD and us is irreconcilable but by CHRIST. Out of him GOD is a consuming Fire. We may indeed feel the Want of Happiness, but we should never dare to go to GOD for it. He would be our Enemy, and we should hate him for it. *False Notions* of the Divine Justice and Mercy could never bring us truly to him: And *true ones* would only drive us farther from him. So that set CHRIST aside, and there can be no Conversion.

We learn also *the Honours of the HOLY GHOST.* He is the Agent who performs this Work. One Reason that Men fall short of this saving Change, is, the not acknowledging him as they ought. Did Men regard the Operation of the Holy SPIRIT more, there would be more frequent Converts. Men are apt to trust to their own Strength when they set about the Work of Conversion. They rob the Spirit of GOD of his Glory, and so it all comes to nothing. He it is who makes this great Change in Men. He must be the Almighty GOD then: and we should honour him as so.

You see *how many mistake in their Notions of Conversion.* Some think that to be converted is only to profess the Christian Religion. They fancy that to turn from Heathenism to Christianity is all that is implied in it. To talk of a Baptised Person's being afterwards converted they think is Cant and Superstition. This is the modern (I wish I could not add, the obtaining and fashionable) Scheme. If we speak of our being *Converted*, they ask, why what were you before? *Jews, or Turks, or Heathen?* Alas, the fatal Mistake! We are all undone in our Natural State, unless we know what Conversion

means. We are all naturally departing from GOD, and seeking Happiness in something below him. If ever we are happy then, it must be by our stopping here, and turning about to him. Conversion does not consist in embracing a new Sect, or Party : In Baptism, or Approach to the Lord's Table ; or any external Privilege, or Advantage, or Alteration. No ; it consists in turning from the Creature to GOD.

We see also the Propriety of the Expression in the Text, *Except ye become as little Children*. Conversion implies such a Change, as will bring us to begin our Life anew. We must become as little Children : modest, unambitious, teachable as they. Like them, we must be *born again* ; we must begin to live again : begin another kind of Life : pursue a quite different End, by quite different Measures. Like a weaned Child, must be weaned from Creatures, and the Things we were formerly fond of. But I would not enlarge here.

I proceed

To shew what we are to understand by the Kingdom of Heaven, spoken of in the Text. *Except ye be converted and become as little Children, ye shall not enter into the KINGDOM OF HEAVEN*. I shall not be long in explaining the Phrase. The Kingdom of Heaven, and the Kingdom of GOD, are principally used in the Evangelists for the State of the Gospel in This World ; or the Rewards of it in the Future. Sometimes it means the Kingdom of Grace ; and sometimes the Kingdom of Glory. And I suppose that tho' the Text may ultimately refer to the Latter, yet it takes in the former also. And therefore we shall consider them both.

Except we be converted and become as little Children, we shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Without this we cannot enter into the Kingdom of Grace. God cannot receive us as his Favourites even in This World, till we have had this Change passed upon us. He will take no Delight in us, while we openly neglect him, and set up Self and Creatures in his Throne. We may indeed belong to his Kingdom of Mercy, and he may have Designs for our Salvation before our Conversion : But we are by no means Subjects in this Kingdom of Grace before this. By no means intitled to his Special Favour, and the Objects of his peculiar Delight.

We

We may indeed belong to the Visible Kingdom of CHRIST in the World, and not be savingly Converted. We may be Members of his Church here, and eat and drink in his Presence, and yet he know nothing of us. But here too, in order to our being worthy Guests at this sacred Feast, Conversion is a necessary Preparation. *Friend, how camest thou in hither, not having a wedding Garment?*

But,

Without this Conversion before we cannot enter into the Kingdom of Glory. Rev. xxi. 27. *There shall in no wise enter into it, any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh Abomination.* And not only has God declared this, all over his New Testament, but it is impossible even in the Nature of the Thing. The principal Happiness in the Kingdom of Glory is, in being perfectly conformed to the Will of GOD: And this, we know, is only attainable by Conversion. We entertain juster Ideas of Heaven, when we apprehend it as a State than a Place. There is indeed such a glorious Place; but we know not where, or what it is. But as to the Temper and Happiness of this Holy World, this every Good Man feels a little of in his own Breast. What do they do in Heaven? What do they Enjoy there? Truly they praise God, they love GOD; they seek their whole Happiness in GOD; and are perfectly conformed to his Will. And now, how can an Unconverted Man enter that glorious World? His whole Soul is bent upon Self and Creatures; here he terminates, and he knows nothing further. Should such a Soul but once get into the Mansions of Glory, he would be like a Swine in a Golden Palace: He'd be quite out of his Element; and long for the Puddle and the Mire again. Like Uzziah with his Leprosy in the Holy Place, 2 Chron. xxvi. 20. *And Azariah the chief Priest, and all the Priests looked upon him, and behold he was leprous in his Forehead, and they thrust him out from thence, yea, himself hastened also to go out.* So would be the Case of the Polluted Soul in the Holy Heavens. Not only would the holy Angels, and Just Spirits drive him out from among them, but he himself would haste also to go out. What should he do there? His Soul has no turn to this Sort of Happiness. Unmortified Lusts and raging Appetites, Pride,

and Sensuality, and Self-Will would be a Hell in his own Bosom, amidst all the Glories of Heaven. His whole Nature must be changed; he must be converted, and begin a New Life, or he could never enter into that blessed State. *Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little Children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.*

Thus I have endeavoured, as clearly as I could, to explain and demonstrate the Doctrine, and I come now to the Solemn Application.

Shall not the Unconverted enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, *Where then shall they go?* They must go somewhere. They are in Being, and they must exist for ever. Here they cannot always live: In a few Days more they must leave this Earth; not suffered to tarry by Reason of Death. To Heaven they cannot go. They have no Part there; nothing to do there: The Voice of CHRIST, like a Flaming Sword, guards the Passage against them. *Verily I say unto you, they shall not enter there.* Well then, what will become of them? O fearful, destitute, ruined State! The infallible Word of GOD informs us where the miserable Creatures must take up their Eternal Lodging, Matt. xxv. 46. *These shall go away into everlasting Punishment.* Mark ix. 43, 48. *into the Fire that never shall be quenched: where the Worm dieth not, and the Fire is not quenched:* Rev. xiv. 10, 11. *The same shall drink of the Wine of the Wrath of GOD, which is poured out without Mixture, into the Cup of his Indignation, and he shall be tormented with Fire and Brimstone, in the Presence of the holy Angels, and in the Presence of the Lamb; and the Smoke of their Torment ascendeth up for ever and ever; and they have no Rest Day nor Night.* He that overcometh, indeed, shall inherit all Things: He that is converted and has his Nature changed, shall enter into the World of Glory: *But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their Part in the lake which burneth with Fire and Brimstone, which is the second Death,* Rev. xxi. 7, 8. See now the Place to which the unconverted must go! See the gloomy Landskip of that infernal World! And O, are we not amazed? are we not in Agony, about our escape from

from this Ruin ? Who can dwell with devouring Fire ? who can dwell with everlasting Burning ? Is not the Case awful and dreadful ? And do not our Hearts quiver, and our Souls sink and die within us ? Behold, Life and Death set before us : Eternal Life, and Eternal Fire ; and are they insignificant Things ! O the Madness ! if they make no Impression upon us. On the one Hand we are informed, *Repent and be converted and your Sins shall be blotted out* ; on the other, *Except ye be converted ye shall in no wise enter into the Kingdom of Heaven*. Nay, we must take up our eternal Abode in the World of Darkness, and Fire, and Chains. Ah ! miserable Case of Unconverted Men ! Who would not fear, who would not fly their Doom ? And therefore,

Shall we not, my Brethren, *labour instantly after that Conversion* which alone can save us ?

Turn ye, Turn ye, why will ye die. Consider the matter, and debate it with your own Hearts. Conversion begins in serious Consideration. *I thought on my ways, and turned my Feet unto thy Testimonies*, was the good old way, Psal. cxix. 59. Let us then go alone, and put the Case to our selves, ‘ Am I converted or not ? What Happiness am I pursuing ; a Happiness in the Creature, or a Happiness in the Enjoyment of GOD ? Can I think that the Possession of any Temporal Good can make me Happy ? Have I not often made the Experiment already ; and have I not as often been disappointed ? And why should I try any more ? Is it not high Time for me to turn about, and see if I cannot find that Happiness in GOD, which till now I have in vain sought for in Objects below him ? ’ Propose these Questions to your own Souls, and see what Answer your Conscience will frame upon them.

Now be convinced that you cannot give this Turn to your selves. Learn to feel and be sensible how attached to Self and Creatures you are. Mourn it, and confess it before GOD : and tell him how undone you are without his Almighty Grace. Plead with him, in Tears and Agony, to change your vile Nature : to turn you savingly to Himself. Be importunate, be restless till you find this done for you : Till you find a Soul intirely forsaking the Creature and pursuing its whole Satisfaction in GOD alone. ‘ Till CHRIST appears transcendently

cendently dear and lovely to you ; and you can joyfully leave this World to go to His Arms and his Bosom. This divine and saving Turn of Soul, may be given to you, as you are in the Use of these appointed Means labouring to obtain it.

And let those of us who have been converted, live becoming the Change we are under. Be thankful, be joyful : thankful to the God who has turn'd us, and joyful that we are passing to Heaven. Let us labour more and more after the Heavenly Temper : Love GOD more ; think on him, work for him, long and wish to be with him. If ever we find a prevailing Fondness for Creatures after this ; if ever we find our Wills going to rebel, or our Desires tend to this World ; let us immediately check the inordinate Affection, and say, 'No, I have renounced these long ago. I have chosen GOD for my Portion, and his Will for my Law long ago. GOD forbid, that after having escaped the Snare, I should be again taken and entangled therein. No, No, farewell Creatures ; no more shall you tempt me from my true Happiness. Farewell the Riches I once coveted ; the Applause I once grasp'd after ; the Pleasures that looked so charming. Farewell Felicity on Earth ; and welcome the Will of my GOD : welcome Everlasting Life. Welcome the Good Things of Earth, which my GOD pleases to give me ; But adieu all Thoughts of Happiness in the Possession of these. Welcome Afflictions too ; the Gifts of my GOD, and the Purchase of my SAVIOUR. Shall I receive Good at his Hands, and not receive Evil ? 'Tis the Cup which my Father gives me, why should I not drink it ! Other Lords have had Dominion over me : But what have I any more to do with Idols ?'

And while we are thus awakening the Piety of our own Souls, how should we pity a miserable World about us ! Unhappy Creatures ! they know not what this Love to GOD means. They never felt what it is to be resigned to the Will of GOD, and swallowed up in his Love and his Praises. They are, as we once were, chained down to Sense and Creatures ; and have no Idea of Conversion and the New Birth. You may talk to them eternally of these things ; but they discern them not : you had as good go to explain the Mystery of Colours to a Man born blind. Ah, Poor Men ! how should

we pity and pray for them : How should we contrive to shew them their Danger and Misery ; and labour with them to make their Escape ? Remember, *He that converteth a Sinner from the Error of his Way, shall save a Soul from Death.* Sure we never need envy them the little Good they possess : But O how should we admire the Free Grace which has distinguished us from them ! There's no Room for boasting in the Case. 'Tis all sovereign, and all free : To GOD belongs the Glory ; and to us Wonder, and Gratitude, and Humility.

We draw on towards a Conclusion. And how can we leave off better than with a View of that Heavenly World spoken of in the Text ? This then shall close the whole.

What a Holy and Happy Place is the Kingdom of Heaven ? There is not one *sinful Person*, not one *sinful Frame* in that World. The Spirits of *just Men* are made perfect before they are admitted there. Though the Good Man *here* loves GOD above all, and chooses his Portion in him, yet this gracious Temper is often shock'd and broken by Temptations and Indwelling Sin. But *There* is no Sin, no Corruption, no Tempter. All the Employment, all the Conversation, and every Thought is about GOD and his Glories. *Alleluia, for the Lord GOD omnipotent reigneth !* This is the Language, the Temper, the Employment, the Felicity of Heaven. There, they are *fill'd with all the Fulness of GOD.* There, *GOD is all in all.* In that happy World, every Inhabitant, and every Object, glorifies GOD, and is filled with his Glory. His Perfections and his Love take them intirely up ; and nothing else is seen, or heard, or thought of. O happy, happy State ! The Converted Soul knows a little what this means : but what it fully is, we know not now, we shall know hereafter. *Eye hath not seen, nor Ear heard, nor can the Heart of Man conceive it all.*

These, ye Converted Souls, are the Joys set before you ! These are the Glories, and this the Felicity reserved in Heaven for you. Here you perceive a little *Taste* of it, in your Conformity to the Will of GOD ; There you shall set down to the full *Feast*, and be perfectly conformed to his Will. Here the Joy of the LORD enters into you ; There you shall enter into the Joy of your Lord.

A M E N.

Felicity Found and Fixt.

I.

BY Ev'ning Floods my Songs have rose,
Amid the waving Trees,
Calm as the peaceful Floods repose,
And gentle as the Breeze.

II.

There oft I've had my LORD my Guest,
Ye Shades, my Joys proclaim!
I've pour'd my Raptures in his Breast,
He felt the mutual Flame.

III.

Oh! how his ardent Bosom beats!
His Eyes enchanting shine!
"I'm my Beloved's, he repeats,
"And my Beloved's mine.

IV.

"The Cross, with all its tort'ring Smart,
"And killing Pangs I bore;
"'Twas all to win and fix thy Heart,
"Ne'er to forsake me more."

V.

Canst thou, my Soul, fir'd with these Charms,
After a Rival rove!
Canst thou, in thy inconstant Arms,
Embrace another Love!

